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SUBJECT: FORMER CATHOLIC MONASTERY IN VINH LONG SLATED FOR
RE-DEVELOPMENT

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A former Catholic monastery slated for re-development in the Delta province of Vinh Long has become the latest Church property to spur protests from the Catholic community. Despite repeated petitions by the Provincial Superior of Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres and the Bishop's Office to local and national government offices, the People's Committee of Vinh Long announced that St. Paul's monastery would be demolished to make way for a public square in December. The Sisters have rejected an offer for an alternative property in Vinh Long and continue to claim legal title to the land. The Prime Minister's recent directive to all provinces calling for a review of religious property claims across the country may provide some groups a new window of opportunity to resolve long-standing land issues. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On December 12, 2008, the Vinh Long People's Committee Chairman held a press conference to announce that a former monastery belonging to the Provincial Superior of Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres will be demolished in order to construct a public square. Local authorities also said the Sisters will not be compensated for the disputed land, given that the Sisters had not previously objected to the property being used as a public health facility. (Note: The Sisters of Charity claim they have petitioned for many years to have the GVN return the property, but their requests have been ignored. End note.) The Chairman also said that if the sisters needed an alternative facility to carry out their social work activities, the government would consider such a request. Members of the community, local authorities and representatives of the Sisters of Charity attended the press conference.

¶3. (SBU) The Sisters of Charity, who have been in Vinh Long Province since 1871, ran an orphanage at the monastery until 1977, when they claim local authorities seized the monastery because they believed the sisters were raising orphans to be "anti-government." Despite repeated petitions by the sisters to the local and central governments to have the property returned, the property remained in government hands and local authorities later turned the monastery into a pediatrics ward. When the hospital was relocated, the government wanted to build a hotel on the land, but those plans were eventually scrapped in favor of building a public square.

Sisters Unsatisfied with GVN Offer

¶4. (SBU) According to the Sisters, in May 2008 provincial authorities offered the Order 3,000 square meters of alternative land and US \$85,861, but the Sisters rejected the offer because the money did not correspond to the confiscated property's current value and was "not enough for the hardships they endured." The Sisters claim they still have legitimate title over the land and would like the Vietnamese government to return the property or compensate them at current market value. The monastery, which was located on a 10,325 square meter block of land in the center of the town, has a high commercial value.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: The authorities in Vinh Long seem to be following the lead of Hanoi officials in attempting to "resolve" unsettled property disputes with the Catholic Church by turning the parcels into public property. On January 6, Prime Minister Dung ordered provincial leaders to review all land and property claims by religious groups across the country, citing Resolution 23, which addresses those properties confiscated before 1991. The order, which covers issues like public vs. private use, compensation and legal title, may provide some much-needed resolution to many of the outstanding property issues religious groups face now. While it is certain that all groups will not be happy with the resulting decisions, at least there is hope that the PM's directive will put local leaders on notice their superiors in Hanoi want to see these issues resolved fairly and transparently so as to avoid future incidents. End Comment.

¶6. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

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